September 14, 1958

Mr. Edwin E. Riley
Director
Postal Services Division
Bureau of Operations
Post Office Department
Washington 25, D.C.

Dear Mr. Riley:

The office of the Surgeon General has directed my attention to a proposed rule of the Post Office Department which might have the effect of permitting exclusion from air mails of etiological agents. While it is possible to understand the fears which might arouse the air line companies to wish to exclude these materials from their shipments, a sober evaluation of the influence of such a ruling will I think show that it will have a grave effect on the further progress of medical research in this country. The rapid interchange of diagnostic specimens is an absolute necessity in the efficient and prompt investigation of disease outbreaks and a necessary element in the continued cooperation of research scientists throughout the country. Dr. Portefield, the acting Surgeon General, has in my opinion stated very well the cogent arguments against a situation that would allow such a prohibition and I can hardly add to their content. I can say that this is a matter which all of my colleagues in medical research will feel strongly about as it may have the most deleterious effects.

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Chairman, Department of Medical Genetics

JL/jp

P.S. If the effect of the present proposals is to redirect attention to necessary safety precautions in the transmittal of such material, they may in the long run have a beneficial effect. Personally, I have felt for a long time that glass containers subject to breakage were a singularly inappropriate method of shipping dangerous specimens, notwithstanding the possibility of wrapping them in metal containers. It is fair to say, I think, that manufacturers in this country have not taken advantage of modern materials and techniques that might lead to an easy solution to this problem. For some time I have been urging that shipping

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containers for example test tubes and small bottles, appropriate for the transportation of such specimens should be manufactured in an unbreakable plastic material such as nylon. This would have the advantage of being sterilizable in the autoclave as readily as glass. A limited range of laboratory ware is now available in polyethylene and polypropelene, especially by the Nalge Company, and these items might be useful for the indicated purposes. However they are not entirely satisfactory, nor as satisfactory as nylon would be, in my opinion, owing to the wall thickness and limited transparency of that plastic. I have tried to interest some manufacturers in producing the items in nylong, to match what British firms have done in nylon syringes, but have not been successful owing to the inapparence of an adequate market. I wonder if the Public Health Service might not help to serve a useful function in the direction of standardizing the requirements for shipment of dangerous materials in a container of a suitable material in such a fashion as to create the necessary market for such items. Conceivably it might also help function as an intermediary in persuading various manufacturers to undertake this program.

The material in this postscript was not included in the original letter to Mr. Riley for obvious reasons.

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Chairman, Department of Medical Genetics

JL/jp